

TOURISM UPDATE

SPITI VALLEY



PHOTOS BY SUPRIYA SEHGAL

▲ **Cherub Country:** Spiti children are an energetic and friendly bunch, ready with a smile and pose for the tourists' cameras, uninhibited and joyful.

◀ **Lakeside View:** Chandra Tal with its mesmerising depths is a must-visit, especially on a full moon night.

▼ **Passage to Paradise:** Imposing snowclad mountains overlook the Kunzum La or Kunzum Pass, the entrance to Spiti Valley from Lahaul, like silent sentinels.

In the Middle Land

Spiti Valley is a perfect summer getaway offering unrivalled delights **BY BINITA SINGH**

Come summer and a mid-year break becomes essential to rejuvenate sagging spirits. The unrelenting sun makes the summer months of June–September unbearable in the northern plains. On the positive side, this is the best time to go travelling to some of the coolest spots in the country. Spiti Valley is easily among the best destinations to head to for a summer break.

Spiti is not for the faint-hearted though, situated at a height of 4,250m above sea level, in a cold desert. It is also not a destination for the 'wired to their gadgets' generation unless they can bear to live without modern communication like the internet, or even the newspaper, for that matter,



for the duration of their travel. Before starting on the trip, you need to leave behind the delicate sensibilities that go with modern amenities. In Spiti Valley, humans live with nature as its true firstborn.

Spiti Valley was closed to the world for more than 30 years, and it was in 1992 that its doors were thrown open to the outside world. Perhaps this is the reason, why the Valley retains its innocence and charm even today. Nature too has designed it so. Perched high amid the Himalayas, Spiti still does not receive

many footfalls, as for eight months in a year it remains snow covered and is remote.

Situated between India and Tibet, Spiti meaning the “middle land” or the “middle country”, has been aptly named. Accessible from both Shimla and Manali, the latter route offers a more picturesque and exciting road journey. For those less adventurously inclined, the alternative route to Spiti Valley from Shimla via Kinnaur guarantees a much more comfortable ride right up to Kaza, though you will miss out on the exciting possibilities that the Manali route offers. Still, for the city bred, the change from lush green Shimla to barren rock-cut monasteries is truly spectacular as the drive takes one past Sutlej River coming in from Tibet and then Spiti River coming down from the spectacular Kunzum La (15,050 ft).

Manali is well connected with Delhi via road, rail and air. The drive from Delhi is 12–14 hours. Take in the breathless beauty of the orchard-lined countryside from Kullu to Manali. Just 20 km short of Manali is Katrain village. Break journey at this quaint, quiet village or head to old Manali and put up at one of the budget hotels there. For those looking for more comfort, head 10 km further up to Sarsai village for more luxe accommodation. Manali is the last touristy paradise en route to Spiti.

The journey from Manali to Kaza via Rohtang and Kunzum La through the cold desert at high altitude is breathtaking. Bus services are available, but hiring an SUV is an advantage as many may not feel up to the rickety bus rides up the narrow rocky mountain road, staring down deep gorges, rushing water and deep ravines. Make Kaza your base for sightseeing sojourns. Walkers can enjoy a few hours of exercise travelling between villages, taking in the rustic beauty as they breathe in the pure Himalayan air. Others can use the SUV and the services of their local guides to uncover the hidden treasures of Spiti Valley.

As you leave behind Manali and Rohtang Pass, you virtually leave behind the last traces of human civilization till you reach Kaza, a good 8–10 hours’ drive. Except for a couple of roadside eateries, this is a barren mountainous stretch that strikes awe with its majesty. Stop at Chatru or Batal for your refill of mineral water and soft drinks and a meal if you are hungry. Behold the majestic Kanzum Pass (14,931 ft), about five hours from

FIVE KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. THE HEART IS WHERE THE HEARTH IS



Like most cold places, in Spiti Valley too, a large kitchen with a persistent fire forms the centrepoint.

2. GUARDIAN ANGEL



A huge statue of Buddha looks over the Tibetan village of Langza, among the highest and most picturesque villages.

3. EAGLE MAIL



At Kibber village is one of Asia's highest post-offices with a red dot on its wall, a communications tool.

4. STARK BEAUTY



The Komic monastery located at 4,785m above sea level is the highest monastery in Spiti Valley.

5. RARE SIMPLICITY

People of Spiti Valley live simple rustic lives, are hard working, open and charming.



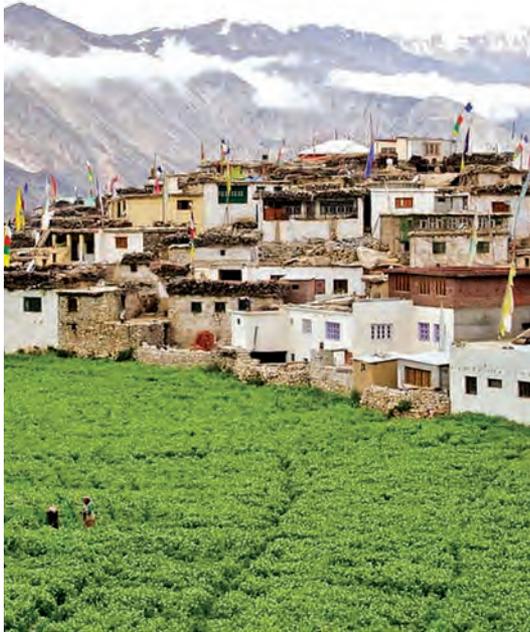
Touching the sky: Monasteries in Spiti Valley are built far up into the high mountains and seem to be in silent communion with the vast blue expanse above.

Rohtang Pass, and take in the sheer breathtaking beauty of Shigri Glacier. Be ready to snap some unforgettable photographs to share with friends and frame for eternity. The narrow road often seems to disappear completely into the mountains. Signs of civilization start reappearing as you near Kaza. It is well connected with both Manali (224 km) and Shimla (425 km). Situated at the foot of the step-ridges on the left bank of Spiti River, Kaza is the subdivisional headquarter of Spiti Valley, and the former headquarter of Nono, the chief of Spiti. It is best to retire for the night after a hearty meal, for the real journey with many exciting trips, begins the next day.

The following day, take a trip to Gette, a short distance from Kaza. This tiny hamlet is the highest village in the world at an altitude of 4,270m. Kibber, locally known as Khyipur, among the highest villages in the world at an altitude of 4,205m above sea level in a narrow valley, is also worth a look. It is surrounded by mountains on all sides. Stay at one of the rest houses or homestays and enjoy the feeling of being at the top of the world.

Chandra Tal is a sight to behold on a full moon night. On route to Kaza from Manali, just before Batal, the road bifurcates for Chandra Tal. The lake is approximately 6 km from the Kunzum Pass in Lahaul and Spiti district that connects Spiti, Chandra Tal Lake and Lahaul areas. A camping trip to this natural lake situated at an altitude of 4,300m, set amidst hills, is a thrilling experience. What adds to the mystery of the lake is the piece of mythology attached to it. It is said that Chandra Tal, with its depthless blue water (it has a circumference of 2.5 km), is the spot from

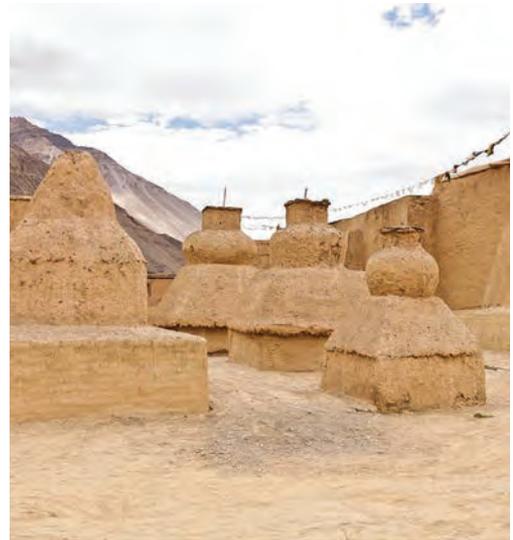




▲ **Unwind at Peace:** The Dhankar monastery offers a staycation for the world weary traveller.

◀ **An Oasis of Green:** Nako village with its eponymous lake is a beautiful and unforgettable sight.

▼ **History Beckons:** Tabo, the oldest monastery in Spiti Valley, invites one to explore India's rich past.



where Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava brother in the epic *Mahabharata*, was taken to heaven alive on Lord Indra's chariot.

A visit to Kunzum Pass (4,590m), the gateway to Spiti from Kulu and Lahaul, is another memorable experience. Driving down to the Pass is like a 3D cinematographic display of Nature in its most spectacular form. The sight of Bara-Shigri Glacier, the second longest glacier in the world, in its stark white hues, blending into the many hued blue of the sky, is captivating. A visit to the temple at the top of this pass with colourful prayer flags (*Lungtas*) swaying in the breeze, like a clothesline with blue, green, yellow, red, and white scarves drying on it, is a quaintly enchanting sight. A night halt at Batal, for the breathtaking view from the top, underlines the surrealistic quality of visual experiences at Spiti. There is the awesome Spiti Valley on one side and on the other is the Chandra-Bhaga mountain range with its numerous peaks.

A trip to Spiti Valley is incomplete without visiting the various monasteries that dot it. Plan a stay at Dhankar Gompa, 35 km from Kaza. The more than 1,000 years old monastery offers stay and basic food to visitors at what is called the new monastery. The old Dhankar Gompa was damaged due to unprecedented rainfall in Spiti Valley, which usually hardly receives any rain. The Lamas (monks) are a mine of information about the history of the monasteries. Take a guided tour of the monastery and the attached museum with one of the monks. The monastery, atop a 300m rocky ledge near the confluence of Pin and Spiti Rivers, is an architectural specimen. In Tabo, a quiet village 50 km from Kaza, is situated the famous 996 AD Tabo monastery. Set against the backdrop of clear blue skies and rocky mountains, the monastery wears a magical look. It houses antique murals, Thangka paintings, scriptures and sculptures. Known as the 'Ajanta of the Himalayas', this monastery offers a glimpse into the rich and diverse heritage of India. The 11th century Key Gompa,

situated approximately 12 km from Kaza, is the largest monastery and Buddhist learning centre in Spiti Valley. The monastery, with a cluster of closely-built white houses, looks like a huge Victorian castle overlooking the Spiti River. It is also known as Little Tibet. Here again, visitors can view 800 years old Thangka paintings, murals, musical instruments and priceless manuscripts. The monastery terrace provides a mesmerizing view of the surrounding valley.

A yak ride is a must when in Spiti. Plan a visit to Losar village situated at the confluence of Losar and Peeno streams. At a height of 4,080m above sea level, Losar is a big and picturesque village offering a taste of Spiti life. Ignore the hotels and opt for home stays in villages for a taste of rustic life and local culture. After a fun-filled stay, vacationers can either choose to return via Manali or go on to Leh via Keylong and Tanglang la by road for an extended vacation. Whichever route they choose to Spiti Valley, what is certain is the feeling of awe, inspiration and invigoration that visitors come away with. ■